Podium Presentation
Romance of the Three Kingdoms through the Lens of Chinese Philosophical Tradition
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While Romance of the Three Kingdoms, a fourteenth-century historical fiction detailing the events of Three Kingdoms period in Chinese history (220-280 A.D.), has been a popular text that has seen re-imagining in media and translation to numerous different languages, the scholarly discussion takes the text at face value. This project offers explanations for the popularity of Romance of the Three Kingdoms by considering its link to the various philosophical teachings that emerged during the Warring States period (475-221 B.C.). In this paper, I argue that the text, using the trappings of the Three Kingdoms period, is actually an exploration into Confucianism, Taoism, and Legalism – philosophical teachings that helped shape Chinese history and culture. To establish this connection, I examined the Tao de Ching, the primary text of Taoist philosophy, the Analects, the primary text of Confucian philosophy, and Sun Tzu’s Art of War, a prominent Legalist text, and compared their major teachings with the themes and events presented in Romance of the Three Kingdoms. I also examined writings on the life of the author, Luo Guangzhong, to determine how the author’s background and motivations as well as developments during the fourteenth century might have influenced this particular work. This study illuminates the important role that Chinese philosophical teachings had on such an important text by showing the three kingdoms as a metaphor for the three major Chinese philosophies. The popularity of this text suggests that these philosophical teachings resonated with many people in China during the fourteenth century and beyond.